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AUTHOR Eisenberg, Ann R.
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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the development of the ability to talk about events in time -- to specify occurrence in time with reference to the present as well as to locate events in time with reference to each other. The child's learning of how to mark the different kinds of relationships between two events is discussed. This study of current relevance involves use of constructions that permit reference to a time other than the event time in order to make some statement about event time and the event itself. A number of linguistic means used by the subjects in making utterances "currently relevant" are reviewed. Primary concern is with the young child's early use of adverbial particles to encode this type of relevance. These particles are non-explicit means of encoding relevance. They mark the predication as being relevant to two or more points in time without altering the core propositional meaning of the utterance and without specifically mentioning the two times in full surface propositions. The study of these particles has semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic application to the study of language acquisition. (Author/JK)

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Ann R. Eisenberg

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THE EMERGENCE OF MARKERS OF CURRENT RELEVANCE

Ann R. Eisenberg
University of California, Berkeley

The study presented here is part of a larger study focusing on the development of the ability to talk about events in time: to specify both occurrence in time with reference to the present (i.e., speech time) as well as to locate events in time with reference to each other. Most studies of children's "time-talk" have concentrated on either the ability to talk about the "not now" (i.e., tense) and/or the ability to represent events as either completive or progressive (i.e., aspect). Still relatively unexplored, however, has been the ability to talk about events that take place at one point in time with respect to their "relevance" to another---in particular, to view the past as extending into the present, having present traces and consequences. For example, in the event described by The chair fell over again the act of falling is related to a similar previous act and is seen within a larger temporal construct, involving both the first act of falling and the second. In Have you been reading the book?, reading the book is not seen as a finished activity, but as something that has been ongoing until the speaker enters the room and asks the question.

Being able to mark the relevance of one time to another is another aspect of the young child's growing linguistic competence. Marking relevance involves making a "comment" about the event that is being discussed by invoking its relationship to some prior or subsequent event. Children have to learn how to indicate which of their utterances are relevant to the previous discourse or to events occurring outside the "here-and-now." In other words, they must learn to manipulate the linguistic devices to provide the appropriate temporal and/or discourse contextualization for their utterances.

One feature that children have to learn is to mark the different kinds of relationships that can hold between two events. This aspect of current relevance defines the focus of this paper. Current relevance here refers to the use of constructions that permit reference to a time other than the event time in order to make some statement about event time and the event itself. For example, the difference between It's snowing outside and It's still snowing outside is not in the event itself. In both cases, the speaker is saying that it's snowing. In the second, however, the speaker adds to that the recognition that it was ALSO snowing at some previous point in time and that the event has been continuing up until speech time. In addition, the utterance reflects the speaker's belief that the listener knew that it had been snowing before. Such markers of current relevance prepare the listener for the proper interpretation of the discourse segment.

There are a number of linguistic means for making utterances

"currently relevant." The use of the present perfect in English conveys the notion that the information presented---the event that actually occurred in the past---has persisting present traces or consequences, as in the response in Example (1):

(1) Adult: Go wash your hands.
Child: I've washed them.

Other tense-aspect forms contrast the present situation with a possible world in which the situation is different because of a mismatch between what has actuall occurred in the current situation and what might have occurred. Modal verbs do this, as does past subjunctive. Cromer (1968) describes the contrast between a present and a relevant non-actual situation, as in You might have lost it. That is, "in a possible past world you didn't lose it (although the opportunity arose) and in the current world you still have it." Adding the word still to a sentence implies a time in the past and continuing to the present when the predication was also true. The insertion of anymore into an utterance implies a time prior to event time when what is no longer true was true.

The common feature of all these examples is that the speaker holds two (or more) perspectives in mind simultaneously and uses linguistic means to call attention to them or to shift attention between them. Examples of sentences which mark current relevance include those which: (1) contradict the listener's current beliefs and expectations; (2) prepare the listener for the following discourse segment by providing and framing information necessary for the appropriate interpretation; or (3) justifies the speaker's current action or inaction.

The primary focus of the present paper is the young child's early use of a number of adverbial particles that encode this type of relevance. These particles (e.g., again, still, anymore) are non-explicit means of encoding relevance. That is, they mark the predication as being relevant to two or more points in time without altering the core propositional meaning of the utterance and without specifically mentioning the two times in full surface propositions. In a sense, they are abbreviated ways of referencing two times. For example, one can say It's still snowing rather than It was snowing before and it's snowing now.

The study of these linguistic particles has semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic applications to the study of language acquisition. When one type of meaning can be expressed both syntactically (e.g., with present perfect) and lexically (e.g., with the adverbial particles) which is learned first? In another vein, one could ask which kinds of relationships which hold between past and present and present and future are easiest for children to learn. For example, is repetition, as marked by again, easier than continuation, as marked by still?

Finally, in terms of pragmatics, the study of linguistic particles represents an example of young children's developing knowledge of situations---their sensitivity to the listener's knowledge and expectations, as well as to the larger context of time which surrounds the discourse. In what cases does the larger context require or deserve mention? Focusing on linguistic particles can also provide information relevant to the child's growing cognitive competence. The ability to mark current relevance increases as the child differentiates the continuous and ongoing background of the present from the present moment itself.

This paper focuses only on the production of these particles. The purpose was to determine which linguistic markers were the earliest to be used by the children and then to ascertain how the children began to use them---that is, what was the context of their use. The six particles examined were again, already, yet, still, anymore, and just (the latter in the sense of an immediately past action). These six particles represent the six that were used productively by nearly all the children by 3½ years of age. In addition, the age at which each child began using the present perfect construction was recorded, in order to compare the acquisition of lexical items to the acquisition of syntax to express a similar concept.

The data were obtained in a project consisting of longitudinal text collection from a group of five children, conducted by Susan Ervin-Tripp and Wick Miller. Texts were collected beginning when the children were about two. Text collection continued for 1½ years, until the children were 40-44 months old. All of the children were first-born, white, middle-class, American, monolingual speakers of English. While the later interviews were structured in some degree in an attempt to elicit various forms of speech (e.g., negatives and plurals), the use of all linguistic particles was spontaneous.

The concorded texts were examined for all utterances which contained any of the six particles and these utterances were noted along with all of the speech and contextual information relevant to the utterance. The decision was made to consider a child to be using a word as long as there were at least two instances in which production was spontaneous---that is, none of the adult's preceding utterances relevant to the situation contained a similar structure. The particles selected for study were chosen because they appeared frequently enough and across a substantial proportion of the children to permit the analysis of their use in greater depth. There were, however, a few additional particles used. One child used not quite and two used almost, but infrequently. Three of the children used an occasional "timeless" adverb (e.g., sometimes, usually, never), all in the last session. In addition, some of the children used a sprinkling of verbal constructions that encoded similar concepts, for example, used to, about to, and keep or stop Xing, but all were quite rare and none were used by more than two of the children. Also not included were the time adverbs, such as after and before, which were the focus of Cro-

mer's (1968) dissertation. While Cromer found few of these six adverbs present in the speech of Roger Brown's subjects prior to four years of age, all of the children in the present study were using at least four of them.

The age at which the children first began using each of the adverbial particles is shown in Table 1. The results of the table can be summarized as follows: Again was the first particle to be used by all of the children. The sequence of acquisition for the other particles, however, was not quite so clear or invariant. Yet already was also early and with one exception was the second particle to appear. Just seemed overall to be the latest to be used. Only one child was using it before the last session and two never used it. The general trend of acquisition was again, followed by already and yet, and then still, anymore, and finally just. The sequence was not invariant, however, and generally it appeared that once the children began to use one linguistic particle to mark current relevance, they were relatively quick to seize on other means to do so.

A comparison with the age at which the children began using the present perfect (indicated to the right in Table 1) reveals that all of the children were using at least two of the particles before and at least four by the time they began using the present perfect. Thus, it would seem that when learning to mark current relevance, children first "discover" some of the lexical options and only later the verbal one. This delay is particularly striking in the light of the fact that, as Cromer (1968) has pointed out, children at this age do have in their linguistic repertoires the separate elements that comprise the present perfect. They have been using have and have to and the past participle for quite some time, but fail to put the two together. The particles, on the other hand, are NEW linguistic forms to express a NEW meaning.

Why a new form before an old one? One possibility is that the new ones, the adverbial particles, have additional pragmatic and interpersonal functions that may initially make their meanings more transparent. The most striking example that would support such an hypothesis comes from the data concerning the use of the particle again. Again, the first particle to appear, can be used in two contexts. The first represents a situation in which an event that had also occurred at some time PRIOR to speech time reoccurs at speech time, as in Examples (2) and (3):

(2) Henry (3;5): (looking through storybook)
And there's the father again.

(3) Carol (3;6): (picks up doll that interviewer (Int.) has taken out of bag)
Did you brought this again?

TABLE 1

The age (in years and months) of first use of each of the six adverbial particles.

CHILD	AGAIN	ALREADY	YET	STILL	ANYMORE	JUST	PRESENT PERFECT
Sally	2;2	2;7	2;7	3;1	---	3;1	3;1
Carol	2;4	2;6	3;1	3;1	3;1	---	3;1
Henry	2;4	3;3	2;11	3;3	2;10	---	3;3
Chuck	2;5	3;1	3;4	---	---	3;4	---
Laura	2;7	2;8	2;10	3;1	3;3	3;8	3;8
MEAN[a] (in months)	28.4	33.8	35.4	38.4	39.2	41.6	39.8

a. Possibly low estimates since when a structure had not appeared in the speech of a child, the mean was figured using the next testing as the date of appearance.

In the other context, the event has also occurred prior to speech time, but is not presently occurring. Instead, the child WISHES it to reoccur, as in (4) and (5):

(4) Carol (2;6): (wants Int. to rebuild a tower of blocks)
Make it again.

(5) Henry (2;6): I want ball again.

In the former case, the use of again serves to mark a similarity between the two events, to connect speech time with some larger context. The latter case, however, is more similar to the child s early requests for "more." It requires only the ability to see that using again reproduces a pleasureable effect. Not surprisingly, none of the children used again to mark similarity before they used it as or with a directive. In fact, they did so at about the same time that they began using the other particles.

Already, which tends to be the next particle used, is also initially used within a specific interpersonal context. Early utterances with already were commonly produced in situations in which the child was giving a reason for noncompliance---that is, that something need not be done because it had already been done, as in Example (6):

(6) Laura (3;1): (dressing and undressing dolls)
Int.: How 'bout taking the shoes and socks off Sally, too?
Laura: Sock - she's shoes and socks is already off.

Garvey (1975) and Eisenberg (1978) have shown that children as young as three years of age recognize that having previously performed an action constitutes a sufficient justification for nonperformance following a directive. Note also that in this situation the other speaker sets up a context where the use of the particle is appropriate, and within the context of that type of situation, the child has probably received a number of similar responses.

Just was quite similar to already in that most of the early contexts in which it was used were instances where the child had been asked to do something, and the fact that s/he had RECENTLY performed that action made compliance unnecessary (as far as the child was concerned, anyway). Examples include the situations in (7) and (8):

(7) Laura (3;1): (feeding her doll, Joe)
Int.: Ask Joe if he wants another blue pancake.
Laura: I just gave him one.

(8) Chuck (3;4): (building block towers)
Int.: Can I knock yours down now?
Chuck: No, cause I just built mine.

There is also evidence that for some children yet may be initially learned either as a response unit, not yet, or as part of prohibitions. Four of the children who used yet used it initially only with not, that is, NOT as part of a full sentence, as in Example (9):

(9) Chuck (3;4): (playing with dolls)
Int.: Are they all dry from their bath?
Chuck: Not yet.

Further evidence for the possibility that some children may not at first separate the components of not yet is found in Laura's speech. Although she began by using not yet in full sentences, she did not delete not from in front of yet even though not appeared before the verb as well. For example, she produced utterances such as I not finish not yet and I don't go to bed not yet. She continued using not yet this way until 3;3 and only at 3;8 did her utterances with not yet all resemble standard adult usage. The most difficult use of yet to master would seem to be in questions where it is not accompanied by a negative. There was only one example of this, uttered by Sally in her last session.

One additional interesting feature of the data was the lag between the initial uses of already and just although both encoded the current relevance of a past event and both were initially used in similar situations, particularly as a justification for noncompliance. One possible explanation is that of cumulative complexity: just has the added semantic feature of that event having occurred not just in the past, but in the IMMEDIATE past. Similarly, all of the children were using not yet before they were using not quite. Not yet and not quite share the feature of a time in the future when the predication being negated will be true, but not quite adds the feature of immediacy. That is, both I'm not done yet and I'm not quite done imply that the speaker will be done at some point in the future, but the sentence with not quite ALSO indicates that that point will occur shortly, while not yet is unspecific as to duration. The same argument can be made in a comparison of yet and almost.

If the cumulative complexity hypothesis can explain the age difference between the first use of already and just, why is it that none of the children ever used just in place of already---that is, to invoke a prior performance of an action as justification for noncompliance ONLY with just? One possibility is that just already had a meaning for the children. By the time they began using already, all of the children were using just for emphasis or to mean only, as in Examples (10) and (11):

(10) Int.: Why do you want me to go back in your house?
Susan (2;9): Cause I just do.

(11) Int.: What are you doing, Chuck? (2X)
Chuck (2;9): (with playdoh) I'm just dibbing the donut.

In conclusion, the overall impression is that once children have become aware of a concept that can be expressed through language, they are relatively quick to seize on a variety of ways to express that new meaning. That is, once children are using particles to express repetition, the particles expressing continuation, unneeded repetition, a relevant immediate past, etc. are the next logical step. Among the operating principles that Dan Slobin (pers. comm.) is currently working on is one that states that cognitive development is the pacesetter for linguistic development and that children will seek linguistic expressions for newly emerging concepts. While it is unclear from the present data how much BEFORE the first use of markers of current relevance that children have the ability to hold two events in mind simultaneously, the indication is that once they do so, they RAPIDLY begin to use a number of ways to express the relationship between those two events. One of the "keys" into the actual discovery of these means of expression may, however, be the USES to which the linguistic structures can be put within the context of interpersonal negotiation. That is, certain lexical items that express relationships in time may be learned earlier because in addition they "get things done."

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